

Book Reviews

Scottish Traveller Tales: lives shaped through stories. *Donald Braid*. 2002. Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi. 313 pp. (Cloth US\$ 42). ISBN 1-57808-450-3

Reviewed by Colin Clark

For a physicist Donald Braid is a highly skilled folklorist. His fateful meeting with Hamish Henderson at the famous School for Scottish Studies, Edinburgh, in 1985, eventually led him to Duncan Williamson's door in Strathmiglo, Fife. It also marked the beginning of what Braid acknowledges is his continuing journey into the heart of what he calls 'human experience' or, with regard to this particular book, Scottish Traveller storytelling. Indeed, it would seem logical to conclude that *Scottish Traveller Tales: lives shaped through stories* is the culmination of Braid's work to date and the book illustrates that he spent his time wisely and listened hard to what people told him during his fieldwork and return trips to Scotland. It is clear from the text that he recorded and transcribed their words with a great deal of care, attention and enthusiasm. To be sure, though, this is not just one of those books that lists and reproduces a body of work that we could call 'Scottish Traveller tales'. The erudite analysis offered by Braid is deep, rich and insightful and gives way, in places, to some critical and reflexive thoughts about how the author engaged with 'his people'. There is a real warmth and feeling evident here and it is easy to see how Braid was successful in capturing the Traveller way of seeing the world, filling it with imagery and words that help them understand where they have come from and where they are heading to.

As well as a substantial introduction and conclusion there are five main chapters in the book, each one a good forty or fifty pages long and containing many examples of the songs and stories told by a few of the main Scottish Traveller storytellers. Indeed, Braid is a skilful writer and he weaves the different chapters and sections together in a very tight, yet fluid, way that allows for a largely seamless read and the 'Traveller voice' to come through loud and clear. Having said this, he does occasionally get immersed in tech-

Colin Clark works in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Claremont Bridge Building, Claremont Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, England. Email: Colin.Clark@ncl.ac.uk.

Romani Studies 5, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2003), 73–75. ISSN 1528-0478

nical detail (pp. 136–41), which will no doubt be of interest to some folklorists and other specialist readers but tends to upset the flow of the text and the arguments being pursued. It should also be mentioned at the outset that the spotlight that brightly shines throughout the book on Duncan Williamson—though most worthy of it, of course—can sometimes push the other Traveller storytellers who feature in the book into the shadows a little. People like Betsy Whyte, Willie McPhee and Willie McDonald, to name but a few, do not get the same level of attention in the book and there are, it could be argued, some general concerns here with how representative the text is. Likewise, some of the rather casual generalizations Braid offers about Scottish Traveller storytelling and Traveller culture more generally seem a little ill-thought through—not least the contention that Traveller culture can be characterized as ‘anarchy’ (p. 50).

The five main chapters interrogate a number of topics, ranging from the history and traditions of Traveller storytelling in Scotland to the functions they serve for contemporary Traveller identity and worldview. Also discussed in some detail (in the first chapter) is the belief that these ‘cracks’ and stories (which are quite different in form, substance and meaning, as Duncan Williamson and Eckie Sutherland point out to Braid, p. 88) help bind Traveller communities together. It is through the largely oral transmission of shared cultural practices and beliefs, which are constantly adapting and changing due to both internal and external forces, that Traveller identity is not only shaped but also allowed to grow and develop. In essence, as Braid points out, this often revolves around ideas of who and what a ‘Traveller’ is and how they differ from, as Stanley Robertson would say, ‘scaldies,’ (settled people) in Scottish society. The stories that deal with these relationships and exchanges could be called, as Braid suggests, ‘interaction stories’ (p. 202).

In two of the later chapters Braid covers issues of performance, creativity and what the author terms ‘narrative knowing’ (reference to what Duncan Williamson calls ‘dream stories’ or ‘fictional folktales’, p. 274). The chapter covering storytelling performance illustrates how important the audience is in shaping the way stories are told, arranged and represented. Of particular interest here is how Traveller and Non-Traveller audiences pick up on certain themes and issues within stories and what each audience perceives as being important and worthy of comment. This goes beyond the fictional world, of course, and enters the ‘real’ world of ‘speech and action’ (p. 202) and impacts on how Travellers and Non-Travellers interact with each other in social, economic and political situations (see also Reid 1997 on con-

tested 'dialogue' between Scottish Travellers and the folklorists). Indeed, it is a shame that so little space in the book is devoted to Traveller interactions and 'storytelling' (that is, expressing identity) through the media (pp. 247–9). The print and broadcast media has been recognized by many Gypsy and Traveller organizations (for example, the Scottish Gypsy Traveller Association) as being an important, if sometimes risky, outlet to draw on if Travellers are to best represent and express their collective and individual 'voices', interests and needs.

Throughout the book there are several key arguments that Braid makes about Scottish Traveller storytelling and its multi-dimensional purposes. However, the key point that Braid repeats several times is that the stories, songs and ballads he heard and recorded during his fieldwork were not just isolated 'things' that Travellers knew about and repeated but, indeed, are deeply connected elements of Traveller identity that are expressed, in various ways, in everyday Traveller lives. They are a crucial part of Traveller identity and world-view and they help bind Scottish Traveller families to a strong sense of tradition, culture and community that dates back many years now. Further than this though, it is clear from Braid's arguments that the issues dealt with by song and story are about common human concerns and interests, reaching far beyond Travelling People and even, perhaps, the borders of Scotland. Indeed, the universality of the stories reproduced in this book, which have a steady blend of humour, sadness, love, hope and fear, will ensure that it reaches a far wider audience than it otherwise might have done. In sum, this is a very welcome and well-written addition to the academic literature on Scottish Travellers and the way that folklorists interpret their storytelling in contemporary times.

References

- Reid, Willie. 1997. Scottish Gypsies/Travellers and the folklorists. *In* Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity, Thomas Acton and Gary Mundy, eds. Pp. 29–37. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press.

The Fish Bride and Other Gypsy Tales. Retold by Jean Russell Larson. Illustrations by Michael Larson. 2000. North Haven, Conn: Linnet Books. 90pp. ISBN 0-208-02474-3.

Reviewed by Matt T. Salo

The cover acknowledgment, 'retold by Jean Russell Larson', should be sufficient warning to anyone desiring authentic Gypsy narratives. These partly remembered, partly rewritten tales, some of which the author reports to have heard originally during the Great Depression era in Iowa, supplemented by five other tales collected by a friend in Wales, are sufficiently removed from and remolded to retain very little resemblance to actual narratives as performed by members of any of the Gypsy groups that might have been found in their areas of origin. The author does not identify the group or groups among which the tales were heard, yet each of the half dozen or so groups which have traveled in Iowa has vastly different oral traditions. She does say that the Welsh tales came from a 'Romany gentleman', by which I assume she meant Romanichals. Place names and first names mentioned in the Iowa tales, if accurate, seem to identify them as of Eastern European origin, but whether of Rom, Ludar or some other Gypsy ethnicity remains uncertain. In any case the two groups would be disparate both historically and culturally. A thumbnail history of the Rom in the introduction shows the author was not aware of the ethnic variety among Gypsy populations.

This collection would be of scant use for a scholar of Gypsy folklore as it does not come even close to meeting any of the criteria set by modern folklore scholars for authentic reproduction of native tradition. There are no descriptions of storytelling contexts, narrative performance, or reasons for the performance of the narratives, and no discussion of the storytellers' roles in their respective groups. Also, as mentioned, these are not verbatim recordings, but later recreations based on decades-old memories and, in the case of the Welsh tales, on another person's notes. As children's stories they are interesting enough, but only as context-free stories. If a child were to form any ideas of what 'Gypsies' are or were like I am afraid he or she would be doing so on the basis of the same old stereotypes which seem to have guided the authors' interpretations. Just as there are no generic Gypsies, but only dis-

Matt T. Salo is former President of the Gypsy Lore Society. Correspondence address: 5607 Greenleaf Rd, Cheverly, MD 20785, USA. Email: mtsalo1@excite.com

Romani Studies 5, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2003), 76-77. ISSN 1528-0478

tinct groups, there can be no single world view that can be attributed to Gypsies. Any attempt to project such an ethos, as the author here seems to be doing, is to create a fiction along the lines of so much past writing which assumed Gypsy homogeneity and ignored their historical and cultural differences. It is also presumptuous to assume that accuracy is not important since the stories are intended only for children as these portrayals of Gypsies may be the only ones to which the child is exposed. Thus, rather than learning something real about actual Gypsy groups and the meanings their stories had for them, the child learns only fictional stereotypes that do not apply to any Gypsy group.